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OP-ED COLUMNIST

## That Magic Moment

By [PAUL KRUGMAN](#)

**A** charming man courts a woman, telling her that he's a wealthy independent businessman. Just after the wedding, however, she learns that he has been cooking the books, several employees have accused him of sexual harassment and his company is about to file for bankruptcy. She accuses him of deception. "The accountability moment is behind us," he replies.

Last week President Bush declared that the election was the "accountability moment" for the war in Iraq - the voters saw it his way, and that's that. But Mr. Bush didn't level with the voters during the campaign and doesn't deserve anyone's future trust.

I won't belabor the W.M.D. issue, except to point out that the Bush administration, without exactly lying, managed to keep most voters confused. According to a Pew poll, on the eve of the election the great majority of voters, of both parties, believed that the Bush administration had asserted that it found either W.M.D. or an active W.M.D. program in Iraq.

Mr. Bush also systematically misrepresented how the war was going. Remember last September when Ayad Allawi came to Washington? Mr. Allawi, acting as a de facto member of the Bush campaign - a former official close to the campaign suggested phrases and helped him rehearse his speech to Congress - declared that 14 or 15 of Iraq's 18 provinces were "completely safe," and that the interim government had 100,000 trained troops. None of it was true.

Now that the election is over, we learn that the search for W.M.D. has been abandoned. Meanwhile, military officials have admitted that even as Mr. Bush kept asserting that we were making "good progress," the insurgency was growing in numbers and effectiveness, that the Army Reserve is "rapidly degenerating into a 'broken' force," and oh, by the way, we'll need to spend at least another \$100 billion to pay for war expenses and replace damaged equipment. But the accountability moment, says Mr. Bush, is behind us.

Maybe we can't hold Mr. Bush directly to account for misleading the public about Iraq. But Mr. Bush still has a domestic agenda, for which the lessons of Iraq are totally relevant.

White House officials themselves concede - or maybe boast - that their plan to sell Social Security privatization is modeled on their selling of the Iraq war. In fact, the parallels are remarkably exact.

Everyone has noticed the use, once again, of crisis-mongering. Three years ago, the supposed threat from Saddam somehow became more important than catching the people who actually attacked America on 9/11. Today, the mild, possibly nonexistent long-run financial problems of Social Security have somehow become more important than dealing with the huge deficit we already have, which has

nothing to do with Social Security.

But there's another parallel, which I haven't seen pointed out: the politicization of the agencies and the intimidation of the analysts. Bush loyalists begin frothing at the mouth when anyone points out that the White House pressured intelligence analysts to overstate the threat from Iraq, while neocons in the Pentagon pressured the military to understate the costs and risks of war. But that is what happened, and it's happening again.

Last week Andrew Biggs, the associate commissioner for retirement policy at the Social Security Administration, appeared with Mr. Bush at a campaign-style event to promote privatization. There was a time when it would have been considered inappropriate for a civil servant to play such a blatantly political role. But then there was a time when it would have been considered inappropriate to appoint a professional advocate like Mr. Biggs, the former assistant director of the Cato Institute's Project on Social Security Privatization, to such a position in the first place.

Sure enough, The New York Times reports that under Mr. Biggs's direction, employees of the Social Security Administration are being forced to disseminate dire warnings about the system's finances - warnings that the employees say are exaggerated.

Still, there are two reasons why the selling of Social Security privatization shouldn't be another slam dunk.

One is that we're not talking about secret intelligence; the media, if they do their job, can check out the numbers and see that they don't match what Mr. Bush is saying. (A good starting point is [Roger Lowenstein's superb survey in The Times Magazine](#) last Sunday.)

The other is that we've been here before. Fool me once ...